

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

CAROLINE PLONKA,	:	Civil No. 3:13-CV-1628
	:	
Plaintiff	:	
	:	(Judge Caputo)
v.	:	
	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
MARY WEAVER, et al.,	:	
	:	
Defendants	:	

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

I. Statement of Facts and of the Case

In this case the *pro se* plaintiff, Caroline Plonka, turns to the federal courts to adjudicate an appeal of an adverse state court decision in a zoning appeal. Plonka's *pro se* complaint, which was filed in United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania on June 3, 2013, and has now been transferred to this court, names six defendants: Mary Weaver, a borough codes enforcement officer; two attorneys who were involved in this state court zoning litigation, Michael Briechele and Thomas Smith; the Susquehanna Borough Council and Zoning Hearing Boards; and the Court of Common Pleas of Susquehanna County. (Doc. 3.)

After identifying these defendants, Plonka details the history of her unsuccessful zoning litigation, litigation that concluded in the Common Pleas Court

with an adverse ruling in May of 2013. Alleging that this ruling is evidence of unfairness by the defendants against her, Plonka seeks in this self-described “land use appeal,” to recover damages of \$250,000 from each defendant. (Id.)

Along with her complaint, Plonka sought, and received, leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (Doc. 2.) However, upon a screening review of Plonka’s complaint, for the reasons set forth below, it is recommended that the complaint be demised without prejudice to Plonka endeavoring to file an amended complaint which addresses the deficiencies identified in this Report and Recommendation.

II. Discussion

A. Screening of *Pro Se* Prisoner Complaints—Standard of Review

This court has a statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints filed by plaintiffs who seek leave to proceed in forma pauperis, 28 U.S.C. §1915(e), and must assess whether a *pro se, in forma pauperis* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips [v. County of Allegheny], 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)]and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn therefrom are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic

Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id.

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn from the complaint are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O’Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of

actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id.

In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court has underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 679. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 678. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 679.

Thus, following Twombly and Iqbal a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a complaint must recite factual allegations sufficient to raise the plaintiff’s claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a 'plausible claim for relief.' In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to 'show' such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

In addition to these pleading rules, a civil complaint must comply with the requirements of Rule 8(a) of the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure which defines what a complaint should say and provides that:

(a) A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain (1) a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court's jurisdiction, unless the court already has jurisdiction and the claim needs no new jurisdictional support; (2) a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief; and (3) a demand for the relief sought, which may include relief in the alternative or different types of relief.

Thus, when a complaint is "illegible or incomprehensible," id., or when a complaint "is also largely unintelligible," Stephanatos v. Cohen, 236 F. App'x 785, 787 (3d Cir. 2007), an order dismissing a complaint under Rule 8 is clearly appropriate. See, e.g., Mincy v. Klem, 303 F. App'x 106 (3d Cir. 2008); Rhett v. New Jersey State Superior Court, 260 F. App'x 513 (3d Cir. 2008); Stephanatos v. Cohen, supra; Scibelli v. Lebanon County, supra; Bennett-Nelson v. La. Bd. of Regents, 431 F.3d 448, 450 n.1 (5th Cir. 2005). Furthermore, dismissal under Rule

8 is proper when a complaint “left the defendants having to guess what of the many things discussed constituted [a cause of action];” Binsack v. Lackawanna County Prison, 438 F. App’x 158 (3d Cir. 2011), or when the complaint is so “rambling and unclear” as to defy response. Tillio v. Spiess, No. 11-1276, 2011 WL 3346787 (Aug. 4, 2011). In our view, these pleading standards apply to all aspects of the court’s threshold analysis of a complaint’s legal sufficiency. Thus, we will apply this analysis both when assessing the adequacy of the factual assertions set forth in the amended complaint, and when examining whether a complaint properly invokes the jurisdiction of this court.

B. This Complaint Fails to State A Claim Upon Which Relief Can Be Granted

In this case, dismissal of this complaint, as drafted, is warranted because Plonka’s pleading fails on several scores to meet the substantive standards required by law, in that it does not set forth a “short and plain” statement of a cognizable violation of some right guaranteed by the Constitution or laws of the United States. Indeed, Plonka’s complaint is fatally flawed in at least three separate respects. The flaws in the *pro se* complaint lodged by Plonka are discussed separately below.

1. The Rooker-Feldman Doctrine Bars Consideration of This Case to the Extent that Plonka Seeks to Appeal State Court Zoning Decisions

At the outset, in this case, where Plonka has filed a civil action which invites this court to reject findings made by the state court in the course of a zoning dispute, the plaintiff also necessarily urges us to sit as a state appellate court and review, re-examine and reject these state court rulings. Indeed, Plonka's *pro se* complaint is cast as a "land use appeal" and Plonka refers to herself as the "appellant," making it unmistakably clear that she is seeking, in part, to ask us to sit as an appellate court in this matter.

This we cannot do. Indeed, the United States Supreme Court has spoken to this issue and has announced a rule, the Rooker-Feldman doctrine, which compels federal district courts to decline invitations to conduct what amounts to appellate review of state trial court decisions. As described by the Third Circuit:

That doctrine takes its name from the two Supreme Court cases that gave rise to the doctrine. Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Co., 263 U.S. 413, 44 S.Ct. 149, 68 L.Ed. 362 (1923); District of Columbia Court of Appeals v. Feldman, 460 U.S. 462, 103 S.Ct. 1303, 75 L.Ed.2d 206 (1983). The doctrine is derived from 28 U.S.C. § 1257 which states that "[f]inal judgments or decrees rendered by the highest court of a state in which a decision could be had, may be reviewed by the Supreme Court...". See also Desi's Pizza, Inc. v. City of Wilkes Barre, 321 F.3d 411, 419 (3d Cir.2003) "Since Congress has never conferred a similar power of review on the United States District Courts, the Supreme Court has inferred that Congress did not intend to empower District Courts to review state court decisions." Desi's Pizza, 321 F.3d at 419.

Gary v. Braddock Cemetery, 517 F.3d 195, 200 (3d Cir. 2008).

Because federal district courts are not empowered by law to sit as reviewing courts, reexamining state court decisions, “[t]he Rooker-Feldman doctrine deprives a federal district court of jurisdiction in some circumstances to review a state court adjudication.” Turner v. Crawford Square Apartments III, LLP., 449 F.3d 542, 547 (3d Cir. 2006). “The doctrine occupies ‘narrow ground.’ Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Indus. Corp., 544 U.S. 280, 284, 125 S.Ct. 1517, 161 L.Ed.2d 454 (2005).” Koynok v. Lloyd, 328 F. App’x 133, 136 (3d Cir. 2009). Cases construing this jurisdictional limit on the power of federal courts have quite appropriately:

[E]mphasized the narrow scope of the Rooker-Feldman doctrine, holding that it “is confined to cases of the kind from which the doctrine acquired its name: cases brought by state-court losers complaining of injuries caused by state-court judgments rendered before the district court proceedings commenced and inviting district court review and rejection of those judgments.” [Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Industries Corp.], 544 U.S. at 284, 125 S.Ct. at 1521-22; see also Lance v. Dennis, 546 U.S. 459, ----, 126 S.Ct. 1198, 1201, 163 L.Ed.2d 1059 (2006)

Id.

However, even within these narrowly drawn confines, it has been consistently recognized that the Rooker-Feldman doctrine prevents federal judges from considering lawsuits “brought by state-court losers complaining of injuries caused by state-court judgments rendered before the district court proceedings commenced and inviting district court review and rejection of those judgments,” particularly where

those lawsuits necessarily require us to re-examine the outcome of state cases. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has observed:

The Rooker-Feldman doctrine divests federal courts of jurisdiction “if the relief requested effectively would reverse a state court decision or void its ruling.” Taliaferro v. Darby Twp. Zoning Bd., 458 F.3d 181, 192 (3d Cir.2006) (internal citations omitted). The doctrine occupies “narrow ground.” Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Indus. Corp., 544 U.S. 280, 284, 125 S.Ct. 1517, 161 L.Ed.2d 454 (2005). It applies only where “the losing party in state court filed suit in federal court after the state proceedings ended, complaining of an injury caused by the state-court judgment and seeking review and rejection of that judgment.” Id. at 291, 125 S.Ct. 1517. . . . Ordering the relief he seeks, however, would require the District Court to effectively determine that the state courts' jurisdictional determinations were improper. Therefore, [Plaintiff] Sullivan's claims are barred by the Rooker-Feldman doctrine. To the extent Sullivan was not “appealing” to the District Court, but instead was attempting to relitigate issues previously determined by the Pennsylvania courts, review is barred by res judicata. See Nationwide Mut. Fire Ins. Co. v. George V. Hamilton, Inc., 571 F.3d 299, 310 (3d Cir.2009) (describing conditions in Pennsylvania under which collateral estoppel will bar a subsequent claim).

Sullivan v. Linebaugh, 362 F. App'x 248, 249-50 (3d Cir. 2010).

We recognize that there are instances in which free-standing due process claims made by a property owner arising out of a zoning dispute are not barred by the Rooker-Feldman doctrine. See Taliaferro v. Darby Twp. Zoning Bd., 458 F.3d 181, 192 (3d Cir.2006). However, in this case the plaintiff's complaint, as drafted, expressly seeks to appeal this state court judgment. Indeed, Plonka identifies herself as “appellant” in this pleading, and characterizes her complaint as a “land use appeal.” (Doc. 3.) Given the plaintiff's own description and characterization of her

case, Plonka's invitation to have us serve as an *ad hoc* Pennsylvania appellate court for matters and claims relating to this zoning dispute should be declined, but without prejudice to Plonka amending her complaint to attempt to state an independent, valid due process claim, if she cannot allege well-pleaded facts supporting such a claim, rather than pursuing this case as an *ad hoc* zoning appeal in federal court.

2. **The Eleventh Amendment to the United States Constitution Bars this Lawsuit Against the Court of Common Pleas**

Dismissal of this Plonka's claims for damages against the Court of Common Pleas is also warranted here since Plonka's *pro se* complaint runs afoul of basic constitutional and statutory rules limiting lawsuits against state agencies and officials. First, as a matter of constitutional law, the Eleventh Amendment to the Constitution provides that "[t]he Judicial power of the United States shall not be construed to extend to any suit in law or equity, commenced or prosecuted against one of the . . . States . . .", U. S. Const. Amend XI. By its terms, the Eleventh Amendment strictly limits the power of federal courts to entertain cases brought by citizens against the state and state agencies. Moreover, a suit brought against an individual acting in his or her official capacity constitutes a suit against the state and therefore also is barred by the Eleventh Amendment. Will v. Michigan Dept. of State Police, 491 U.S. 58 (1989).

Pursuant to the Eleventh Amendment, states, state agencies and state officials who are sued in their official capacity are generally immune from lawsuits in federal courts brought against them by citizens. Seminole Tribe v. Florida, 517 U.S. 44, 54 (1996). Under the Eleventh Amendment, the Commonwealth's immunity exists as a matter of law unless waived by the state, or expressly and unequivocally abrogated by Congress. Congress has not expressly abrogated this constitutional immunity with respect to federal civil rights lawsuits against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the Commonwealth clearly has not waived its immunity. Quite the contrary, the Commonwealth has specifically by statute invoked its Eleventh Amendment immunity in 42 Pa.C.S.A. §8521(b). Thus, while Pennsylvania has, by law, waived sovereign immunity in limited categories of cases brought against the Commonwealth in state court, See 42 Pa.C.S.A. §8522, Section 8521(b) flatly states that: "Nothing contained in this subchapter shall be construed to waive the immunity of the Commonwealth from suit in federal courts guaranteed by the Eleventh Amendment to the Constitution of the United States." 42 Pa.C.S.A. §8521(b). The constitutional protections afforded to the states under the Eleventh Amendment also expressly apply to claims involving state law enforcement agencies; Atkin v. Johnson, 432 F. App'x 47, 48 (3d Cir. 2011), and the various county common pleas courts, which are defined by statute as institutions of state government. See, e.g., Walters v. Washington County, No. 06-1355, 2009 WL 7936639 (W.D. Pa. March 23, 2009); Van Tassel v.

Lawrence County Domestic Relations Section, No. 09-266, 2009 WL 3052411 (W.D. Pa. Sept. 22, 2009).

Moreover, beyond these constitutional considerations, as a matter of statutory interpretation, the plaintiff cannot bring a damages action against the Commonwealth since it is also well-settled that a state, a state agency, or a state official acting in an official capacity is not a “person” within the meaning of 42 U.S.C. §1983, the principal federal civil rights statute. Will v. Michigan Dep’t. of State Police, 491 U.S. 58, 71 (1989). In sum, Plonka’s federal civil rights claims for damages against the Court of Common Pleas is barred both by the Eleventh Amendment to the United States Constitution and by cases construing the federal civil rights statute, 42 U.S.C. §1983. Therefore, since the state courts cannot be sued in this fashion in federal court, these claims should all be dismissed.

3. Plonka May Not Bring a Federal Civil Rights Action Against Private Attorneys Who Represented Parties In This State Zoning Case

In addition, Plonka’s complaint also fails to state a claim against the private attorneys named in that pleading, whose sole role in this matter appears to consist of representing parties in the prior state zoning appeal. Plonka may not bring such claims against private attorneys as civil rights violations pursuant to 42 U.S.C. §1983. It is well-established that § 1983 does not by its own force create new and independent legal rights to damages in civil rights actions. Rather, § 1983 simply

serves as a vehicle for private parties to bring civil actions to vindicate violations of separate, and pre-existing, legal rights otherwise guaranteed under the Constitution and laws of the United States. Albright v. Oliver, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994); Graham v. Connor, 490 U.S. 386, 393-94 (1989). Therefore, any analysis of the legal sufficiency of a cause of action under § 1983 must begin with an assessment of the validity of the underlying constitutional and statutory claims advanced by the plaintiff.

In this regard, it is also well-settled that:

Section 1983 provides a remedy for deprivations of federally protected rights caused by persons acting under color of state law. The two essential elements of a § 1983 action are: *(1) whether the conduct complained of was committed by a person acting under color of state law*; and *(2) whether this conduct deprived a person of a federally protected right*. Parratt v. Taylor, 451 U.S. 527, 535 (1981).

Boykin v. Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, 893 F.Supp. 409, 416 (M.D.Pa. 1995), aff'd, 91 F3d 122 (3d Cir. 1996)(emphasis added). Thus, it is essential to any civil rights claim brought under § 1983 that the plaintiff allege and prove that the defendant was acting under color of law when that defendant allegedly violated the plaintiff's rights. To the extent that a complaint seeks to hold private parties liable for alleged civil rights violations, it fails to state a valid cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 since the statute typically requires a showing that the defendants are state actors. Am. Mfrs. Mut. Ins. Co. v. Sullivan, 526 U.S. 40, 49-50 (1999).

This principle applies with particular force to civil rights plaintiffs who may invite the courts to consider lawsuits against private counsel who represented parties in state court litigation. With respect to this state action requirement, it is well-settled that the conduct of an attorney, representing a client in a state case, does not by itself rise to the level of state action entitling a state prisoner to bring a federal civil rights actions against counsel. See e.g., West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 50 (1988); Polk County v. Dodson, 454 U.S. 312 (1981); Pete v. Metcalfe, 8 F.3d 214 (5th Cir. 1993). Therefore, in the absence of some further well-pleaded facts, Plonka may not convert her dissatisfaction with the performance of these privately retained counsel into a federal civil rights lawsuit.

C. The Complaint Should be Dismissed Without Prejudice

While this screening merits analysis calls for dismissal of this action in its current form, we recommend that the plaintiff be given another, final opportunity to further litigate this matter by endeavoring to promptly file an amended complaint setting forth well-pleaded claims within the period of the statute of limitations. We recommend this course mindful of the fact that in civil rights cases *pro se* plaintiffs often should be afforded an opportunity to amend a complaint before the complaint is dismissed in its entirety, see Fletcher-Hardee Corp. v. Pote Concrete Contractors, 482 F.3d 247, 253 (3d Cir. 2007), unless granting further leave to amend is not necessary in a case such as this where amendment would be futile or result in undue

delay, Alston v. Parker, 363 F.3d 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2004). Accordingly, it is recommended that the court provide the plaintiff with an opportunity to correct these deficiencies in the *pro se* complaint, by dismissing this deficient complaint at this time without prejudice to one final effort by the plaintiff to comply with the rules governing civil actions in federal court, by filing an amended complaint containing any timely and proper claims which he may have.

III. Recommendation

Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons, the plaintiff's request to proceed *in forma pauperis* is GRANTED, but IT IS RECOMMENDED that the plaintiff's complaint be dismissed without prejudice to the plaintiff endeavoring to correct the defects cited in this report, provided that the plaintiff acts within 20 days of any dismissal order.

The Parties are further placed on notice that pursuant to Local Rule 72.3:

Any party may object to a magistrate judge's proposed findings, recommendations or report addressing a motion or matter described in 28 U.S.C. § 636 (b)(1)(B) or making a recommendation for the disposition of a prisoner case or a habeas corpus petition within fourteen (14) days after being served with a copy thereof. Such party shall file with the clerk of court, and serve on the magistrate judge and all parties, written objections which shall specifically identify the portions of the proposed findings, recommendations or report to which objection is made and the basis for such objections. The briefing requirements set forth in Local Rule 72.2 shall apply. A judge shall make a de novo determination of those portions of the report or specified proposed findings or recommendations to which objection is made and may

accept, reject, or modify, in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the magistrate judge. The judge, however, need conduct a new hearing only in his or her discretion or where required by law, and may consider the record developed before the magistrate judge, making his or her own determination on the basis of that record. The judge may also receive further evidence, recall witnesses or recommit the matter to the magistrate judge with instructions.

Submitted this 18th day of June 2013.

S/Martin C. Carlson

Martin C. Carlson

United States Magistrate Judge